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Subject: Guess it came out today! in Greenwire

EPA

National Academies to study program on Senate chopping block

Corbin Hiar, E&E News reporter

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The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine is moving forward with a study of a U.S. EPA chemical assessment program that Senate appropriators have targeted for elimination.

The Senate's Interior-EPA spending bill would zero-out funding for the Integrated Risk Information System, which is currently part of EPA's Office of Research and Development.

If the bill is enacted, chemical assessments would instead be performed under the revamped Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA) program, a move that public health experts fear could leave EPA's chemicals research susceptible to political manipulation (Greenwire, Nov. 21).

The potential demise of IRIS, however, won't stop the National Academies from reviewing it.

"We have been charged with carrying out the study and are focused on completing the statement of task," spokeswoman Jennifer Walsh told E&E News yesterday.

The project scope, which was quietly unveiled earlier this week, calls for considering "changes that have been implemented or that are planned to be implemented by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for its Integrated Risk Information System (IRIS) in response to recommendations made in previous Academies reports, such as Review of EPA's [IRIS] Process and Review of the [EPA's] Draft IRIS Assessment of Formaldehyde."

The study will be conducted by a committee chaired by Dr. Jonathan Samet, a pulmonary physician and epidemiologist who is the dean of the Colorado School of Public Health. Samet also led the National Academies' earlier studies of IRIS.

There are nine other committee members. Five also hail from academia, two are state regulators, one is a retired federal scientist and the last member is a researcher for consumer goods giant Procter & Gamble Co.

"The committee primarily will base its assessment on EPA presentations and interactive sessions," the National Academies scoping document said. Those will occur during a public workshop on Feb. 1 and 2 at the National Academy of Sciences building in Washington, D.C.

The study was requested, and will be paid for, by EPA. The agency sought the review to address concerns the House Science, Space and Technology Committee has about the program, which is currently under fire for its assessment of chloroprene. IRIS found that the chemical is "likely to be carcinogenic" at levels below those already pumped out by the nation's only factory producing the synthetic rubber neoprene (Greenwire, Nov. 7).

Public health advocates, on the other hand, are concerned that congressional meddling has ground IRIS's work to a virtual standstill. The program has an annual goal of 50 assessments, which are used by EPA and state and international regulators to set safe limits for exposure to chemicals. But in 2014, it finished just one (Greenwire, Jan. 23, 2015).

Some supporters of IRIS are cautiously optimistic that the National Academies will bolster the case for keeping EPA's beleaguered chemical assessment program separate from its chemical regulatory program.

"There is a fundamental disconnect in the lack of understanding on our policymakers and the public health needs of integrated risk information for the broad audience and the national needs there and the TSCA program," said Thomas Burke, who oversaw IRIS during the Obama administration as head of research and development at EPA and is now a professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

"I hope that gets evaluated or addressed," Burke said. "I just see a tremendous gap in the scientific capacity of the nation if IRIS goes away."

Other IRIS backers are less hopeful that anything good will come of another review.

In recent years, "the program slowly withered into nothingness," said Rena Steinzor, an expert on chemical regulations and professor at the University of Maryland School of Law. "And it's too late to reverse that, no matter what they say."

The American Chemistry Council didn't respond to a request for comment on the study. The powerful chemicals industry trade group has argued, as Senate appropriators did, that IRIS is no longer necessary due to TSCA reform.

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